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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 002152

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: ISTANBUL JOURNALISTS DEBATE TURKISH POLITICS

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Classified By: Classified by Consul General Deborah K. Jones.
Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

1. (C) Summary: The Ambassador exchanged views with senior Turkish journalists in Istanbul on key foreign policy issues, including Iraq, Iran, Syria, Cyprus, EU accession and domestic developments in Turkey. In this off-the-record discussion, debate was most spirited among the journalists regarding the domestic policies of P Erdogan's AKP government, including the "alcohol ban." Yeni Safak editor Mustafa Karaalioglu, a close Erdogan advisor, suggested the PM will neither call early elections nor personally seek the Presidency. He cited efforts to provoke the government and force such early polls, but maintained Erdogan is aware of this and intends to keep a low profile on controversial issues like the headscarf ban. End Summary.

2. (SBU) The discussion included a cross-section of Turkish journalists, including the editors of Sabah (center-right, secularist), Zaman (moderate Islam-oriented) and Yeni Safak (conservative Islam-oriented), and leading foreign affairs columnists Sami Cohen (Milliyet), Ferai Tinc (Hurriyet) and Cengiz Candar (Bugun). About half the conversation dealt with U.S.-Turkish priorities and regional issues. Ambassador's remarks on the priority Washington attaches to Turkey and to improving our bilateral ties tracked with those given in other public appearances since his arrival in Turkey. Ambassador particularly emphasized Iraq and the need to support formation quickly of a strong, broad-based government there, and he said a key element of the U.S. approach with Turkey on the PKK must be a successful Iraq. After minimal prompting by Ambassador and the Consul General, the Turkish journalists engaged among themselves in a wide-ranging debate over the nature and goals of Prime Minister Erdogan and his government.

What's Going On?

3. (C) Sabah editor Ergun Babahan argued that after an exceptional three years, Turkey is turning back to normal. Whereas Erdogan and the AK party won support or neutrality in the past from those who saw them as a force for change, even if they did not share its core religious values, a large segment of the public now has doubts that have been prompted by Erdogan's increasingly religious rhetoric. Babahan argued that the government has lost focus since the EU's October 3/4 decision to open accession negotiations with Turkey. He repeated the official disappointment here with the EU's failure to carry through on its commitments, including especially regarding Northern Cyprus. The EU process is more difficult now, Babahan argued, particularly as the government missed the chance to prepare the ground for difficult negotiations and explain both the costs and benefits that going ahead with the EU would entail. Now, he suggested, the government is shifting the focus to local issues to strengthen its base. That base is dissatisfied with the government's inability to make progress either on ending the headscarf ban or easing university access for graduates of religious high schools.

4. (C) Zaman editor Ekrem Dumanli disagreed and complained that the Turkish media has exaggerated such moral issues as the alcohol ban that local AK governments are allegedly imposing. He asked Babahan where exactly alcohol had been banned, arguing that what the press interpreted as a ban actually was a change in regulatory approach. Similarly, Erdogan's comments about religion and its role as the "cement" of Turkish society had been distorted and taken out of context, reflecting the fact that Turkey's secular press "misunderstands" religion. There was some debate about the issue of press sensationalism and the need for headlines that sell papers. Several participants agreed that while the picture for the government is now mixed, it would regain focus - if nothing else, when a crisis strikes.

Erdogan's Plans

5. (C) Yeni Safak editor Mustafa Karaalioglu, a close Erdogan advisor who was attentive but quiet throughout the discussion (including because his English is inadequate), observed that

the government faces two pressures - the headscarf challenge and nationalism. Karaalioglu said that these and other issues are being manipulated by the "deep state" and the opposition, which is trying to intensify tension domestically and force early elections. The perception of erratic action by the government stems from its need to react to these forces and send messages to its base. That base is not interested in the alcohol issue, and would not view a ban as a policy victory; its interests lie elsewhere. Karaalioglu suggested the country was entering a period of tension focused on the 2007 presidential election and the possibility of early parliamentary elections. He said Erdogan will keep to the existing election schedule and won't stand for the presidency. Karaalioglu said the PM understands what is going on and predicted Erdogan will keep a low profile on the headscarf issue, seeking to keep the focus on the economy instead. After all, Karaalioglu concluded, the party recognizes that it will be much harder to stop the headscarf issue when there is an AK president.

JONES